

Group calls for scrutiny of mercury RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

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For the first time, Nevada precious metal mines this year were required to measure and report mercury released from smokestacks to the Nevada Department of Environmental Protection, the only state with such a requirement.

But watchdog group Great Basin Mine Watch said local and federal agencies need to more closely monitor the mercury emissions of precious metal mines, citing a Nevada-based gold mine that reported incorrect releases from 2001 to 2005 before correcting the numbers.

Dan Randolph, GBMW executive director, said the new law, approved in March, does not go far enough. The group wants testing done by the state, more frequent testing of mine smokestacks and measurement of the amount of mercury in communities near mines.

"We don't think that anybody truly knows what the releases are," Randolph said. "We do think that it's undermonitored and underreported."

Reno-based Glamis Gold Ltd. officials admitted in October they underreported five years of mercury air emissions by more than 434 pounds at the Marigold Mine in Humboldt County.

"We weren't trying to hide anything, otherwise we wouldn't have ... re-calculated our emissions," said Joe Danni, vice president of corporate relations for Glamis Gold Ltd.

Randolph said the corrections call into question the testing process.

Russ Fields, president of the Nevada Mining Association, said improving technology is resulting in more accurate results.

"We collectively -- meaning the industry, the NDEP, EPA and the public -- are in a transition period from the old reporting methods and the new requirements for measuring mercury emissions," Fields said.

The EPA requires an estimation process, while the new Nevada regulation requires mining companies to use measurements taken directly from the smokestack.

Glamis testing was done by third-party contractors, who Danni said used a scientifically defensible methodology, but the company had questions about the results.

Dangerous toxin

Mercury is a neurotoxin particularly dangerous to children and developing fetuses, released into the atmosphere during ore roasting and other refining operations used to extract gold from ore.

The Smithsonian Environmental Research Center found less than a teaspoon of mercury can contaminate a 22-acre lake causing fish to amass up to 1 million times as much mercury in their bodies as the water they came from.

A search of state government Web sites revealed that a minimum of 43 states, including Nevada, have issued mercury-related fish consumption advisories. From 2002 to 2003, the number of river miles in America reported under advisory for mercury increased by 67 percent, up from 458,000 miles in 2002 according to a joint report created by of the Clean Air Task Force, National Environmental Trust and U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund.

According to the EPA, Nevada metal mines emitted more than 4,700 pounds into the atmosphere in 2004, the largest release nationwide for the industry. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate naturally occurring materials release 800 metric tons of mercury per year into surface waters.

Nevada is taking action to reduce mercury emissions from precious metal mines, NDEP spokesman Dante Pistone said.

"Rather than discussing why and how (mercury spreads), we decided to reduce mercury emissions before it ever gets to the environment," Pistone said.

Permit process

Greg Remer, permitting supervisor for the Nevada Bureau of Air Pollution Control, said the new law requires every metal mine to take several actions to receive a permit and continue operating in Nevada. Numerous steps are built into the permit process to increase mining company accountability and verify accuracy, he said.

The mines must have adequate testing and record-keeping, which will be verified during the state's annual on-site inspections.

In three to five years, companies must install technology determined by the state as the most effective way to reduce mercury emissions. Danni said Glamis Gold Ltd. plans to spend more than \$1.2 million to install equipment that will reduce mercury emissions by 99 percent.

Annually, independent contractors will test smokestack emissions. The methods must be evaluated by the state then approved.

If a company does not comply with the regulations, it will be fined up to \$10,000 a day per violation, Pistone said.

Randolph said testing should be more frequent than once a year.

"It's a snapshot, it's not a picture of what's happening," Randolph said.

He said the type of ore used and how the machines are running could alter the test's results. Randolph wants mercury levels in the ore tested before being roasted to have an estimate of the amount of the toxin that may be released as a comparison to the final total.

He said the amount of the toxin in communities near mines also must be evaluated and the state should do the testing by itself rather than allowing companies to hire contractors to do the tests.

Pistone said mines will be held accountable for the numbers they report.

"We don't have the personnel to be on-site 24 hours a day, seven days a week," Pistone said.

Fields said the mines have plenty of incentive to be accurate. Being honest is safer for people and better for business because a scandal could hurt stock market prices, he said.

"Since Glamis did correct the problem, I would say the self-reporting does work," Fields said. "There's no advantage to report inaccurately.

"The gold mines that we have in Nevada are very large and trade their stock on the New York Stock Exchange. It's not worth it to cover something up. You don't want to be found with numbers that are inaccurate. There's every reason to report the numbers correct."

